

NMFS REPORTS THE SECOND TAKE OF A SHORT-TAILED ALBATROSS IN THE BSAI HOOK-AND-LINE GROUND FISH FISHERY

The National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) confirms the take of a second endangered short-tailed albatross (STAL) in the hook-and-line groundfish fishery of the Bering Sea/Aleutian Islands Management Area (BSAI). On September 16, 2014, NMFS reported the verified take of a STAL and the take of a second unidentified albatross in the same haul. US Fish & Wildlife Service seabird experts, Washington Sea Grant, and NMFS interviewed the observer, reviewed all available information of the incident, and concluded that the previously unidentified bird was also a short-tailed albatross. The birds were taken on September 7, 2014 at 58°47' 54" N and 177°43' 36" W in NMFS reporting area 521 (see Figure 1). The last three documented STAL takes in Alaska were in August 2010, September 2010, and October 2011.

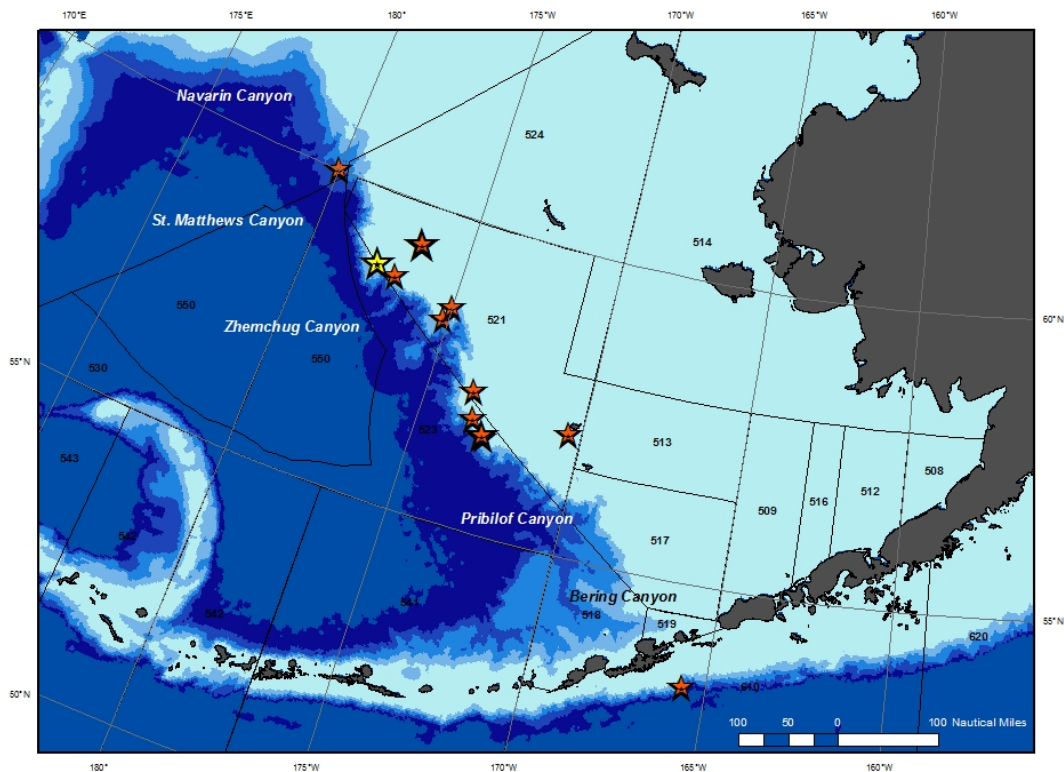


Figure 1. Observed locations of short-tailed albatross takes in Alaska groundfish fisheries since 1987 (red stars). Location of the latest confirmed takes on September 7, 2014 is shown with the yellow star.

The world population of the endangered short-tailed albatross is currently estimated at almost 4,400 individuals. The short-tailed albatross is protected in Alaska waters by the Endangered Species Act (ESA). As a result of consultation with the US Fish and

Wildlife Service (USFWS) under the ESA, USFWS issued an incidental take statement of four birds during each two-year period for the BSAI and Gulf of Alaska (GOA) hook-and-line groundfish fisheries. In instances where the amount or extent of incidental take is exceeded, reinitiation of formal ESA consultation is required. This is the second take in the two-year period that began on September 16, 2013. To date, the incidental take levels have not been reached during the current or any previous Biological Opinions.

The NMFS Alaska Regional Office, NMFS North Pacific Groundfish Observer Program, and the USFWS are actively coordinating efforts and communicating with each other in response to this take incident and are complying to the fullest extent with ESA requirements to protect this species. NMFS is also working closely with the freezer longline fleet in which the bird was taken, to evaluate what additional actions can be taken by the fleet to avoid further takes

To assist in this coordinated effort, NMFS reminds operators of hook-and-line vessels in the BSAI and GOA that they are required to employ multiple seabird avoidance measures. "Hook-and-line vessel operators should be alert to the presence of short-tailed albatrosses in this area and fish with all due caution to avoid further incidental take of this endangered species," said Jim Balsiger, Regional Administrator for the Alaska Region of NOAA Fisheries.

Large flocks of short-tailed albatross (as many as 70) were reported near the vessel that took the two birds. NMFS encourages vessel operators to consider not deploying gear amidst such a congregation of endangered birds; if possible, move on to a location where you don't see the short-tailed albatross. Ed Melvin, a seabird mitigation gear researcher and specialist from Washington Sea Grant, reiterated that in order to keep birds from baited hooks in windy conditions that the streamer line on the windward side should be maintained to windward of the groundline and with a minimum of 200 feet of the line with streamers in the air. This configuration can be achieved by maintaining sufficient drag using a skid buoy with a 10-pound weight fixed at the nose of the buoy. It is this aerial extent of the streamer line with streamers attached that scares birds. The use of round buoys for this purpose should be avoided, as their position astern can be erratic. Also, individual streamers should be long enough to extend to the water. Given that all vessels are different, he recommends that each vessel purchase extra tubing to adjust streamer length as necessary and to make repairs if streamers are damaged. Each crew should have one person in the setting crew responsible for bird avoidance. Additionally, when short-tailed albatross are around the vessel, an additional crew member at the roller may be helpful.

NOAA Fisheries also reminds vessel operators that any short-tailed albatross caught by

hook-and-line gear (regardless of whether the mortality occurs in a sampled portion of the haul) be retained and reported immediately to NMFS or the US Fish & Wildlife Service.

Detailed information on seabird avoidance measures is available at <http://alaskafisheries.noaa.gov/protectedresources/seabirds/guide.htm>

This information bulletin provides information about regulations at 50 CFR 679.24(e). See this cite for the specific regulations.